The Arab Spring and the politics of survival

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The Politics of Survival and the Arab Spring

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The Arab authoritarian state has three features: it lacks legitimacy, its ruling elites depend on a traditional/cliental base of power, and it is constantly engaged in the politics of survival. These features have been integral to the conduct of power in the post independent states in the region. The overthrow of some Arab presidents will not mark the end of this pattern of politics. In this presentation I will argue that the combination of the three features have implications for the transformations that are taking place in the region. A retreat to old authoritarian regimes is possible. In the following twenty minutes, I will first present the three features of Arab Authoritarian states; then I will move to discuss the relevance of these features through three implications.

Features of the Arab Authoritarian State:

First, the Arab regimes lack legitimacy. Or more precisely, the ruling elite lack a legitimate claim to power. When the Arab state was born it faced two kinds of pressure: *intra-state pressures* that emanated from social divisions (tribal, sectarian, religious, linguistic, etc.); and *external pressures* from regional actors, who conspired to alter the nature of these regimes if not swallow them altogether. Concurrently, these states were caught up in the push-and-pull of two conflicting ideologies: Pan-Arabism and Pan-Islamism. Both were the antithesis of a nation state with defined boundaries and citizens who were equal before the law, and consequently have often acted to further undermine these states' legitimacy. Over time, lack of legitimacy became a feature of the system. It is manifest in several indicators.

It includes an unofficial political sphere, where the president, emir, or king can, if he chooses, make decisions that transcend the state's institutions and constitution.

The governments face no independent oversight or accountability. Immunity is a fact, and cannot be challenged, and it has been evident in different forms.

Second, Traditional/cliental Base of Power. These regimes lacked legitimacy in the early decades after independence, when the leaders of many Arab states [were facing one challenge after another and one threat of a military coup after another. This situation pushed these leaders to depend on their traditional or cliental base of power, which, ironically, further damaged their

legitimacy. Within the traditional base of power it is possible to discern two circles of power: the inner and outer.

The inner circle of the power base includes the immediate clan members: the ruler's immediate tribal/sectarian clan.

The wider circle of the power base upon which Arab political systems depend features both diversity and fluctuation. It includes those religious, sectarian, tribal, or regional groups which are marginalized, discriminated against, or feel threatened within the larger system, or simply aspire to be part of the political system and gain some of its spoils. This circle has proved vital for the survival politics of the ruling elite which has often played on the sense of victimization, fear, or ambition among these social groups, and then played them against other competing political powers or against each other.

Third, the Politics of Survival. Lack of legitimacy, as I said, is the primary weakness of Arab states. Ruling elites recognize this deficiency as the Achilles heel that threatens the stability of their regimes. A natural outcome of this deficiency is their dependence on their traditional/cliental base of power. The combination of these two factors is what compels these elites to continuously engage in the politics of survival.

Joel Migdal first introduced the term 'politics of survival' in his state-society theoretical framework. He used it to explain why state leaders in many developing countries have deliberately undermined their own state agencies. Migdal argued that state's leaders realize that creating political mobilization requires effective state agencies that can implement and spread the state's set of rules. They soon discover, however, that effective agencies and their bureaucratic leaders turn into rival power centers, able to channel support and mobilize people toward their own political and personal agendas, thus threatening the political survival of the leaders. As a result, the leaders resort to what Migdal has called the 'politics of survival' to protect their political positions and to weaken both state agencies and their leaders.[1]

To consider how this term 'politics of survival' applies within an Arab context, we must first consider the structure – emphasizing a traditional/cliental base of power – and the operational setting within which Arab politics are conducted.

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[1] See Migdal, Joel S., "Strong States, Weak States: Power and Accommodation", in Weiner & Huntington eds. *Understanding Political Development*; Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States*.

In terms of the structure, two of its features should be emphasized: a) rivalry and competition characterize the leader's relationship even with members of his closest tribal and clan base; b) the core elite depends on traditional/cliental based alliances, but these shift continually. The operational settings also have two dimensions. The internal dimension, as mentioned earlier, is the inter-state pressures that emanate from social divisions (tribal, sectarian, religious, linguistic, etc.) The external dimension is **the external regional pressures** that Arab states often face, and which have conspired to change the nature of these regimes, if not swallow them altogether. [2]

Considering these aspects of the politics of survival, I use the term here to indicate a *leader's shifting alliances with various political and social groups and their allocation and channeling of resources to these groups to ensure his hold on power and to survive in a hostile regional environment*. In other words, and in a Machiavellian sense, this means undertaking whatever is necessary to survive in the shifting sands of Arab politics. The leader

[2] A recent example of this type of competition in Yemen is the power struggle between Yemeni President Ali Abduallah Salih and his half-brother Ali Mohsen Al Ahmar, the commander of the first armored division and of the Northwestern Military Flank, who remains an obstacle to a smooth transition of power to Salih's son. The conflict came to the fore when Salih charged Mohammad with the task of combating the Houthi rebellion in the Saada, a city in the North of Yemen. The rebellion, which started in 2002 and continued until 2007, takes its name from the its Zaydi/Adnani leader, Hussein Badraddin al-Houthi, who was killed in September 2004 and succeeded by his brother, the current leader, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi. The fact that the war continued despite repeated declarations of truce indicated that the two brothers had differing opinions towards the war and that Salih was trying to weaken the military base of his strong half-brother.
In Syria, in 1984, after Hafez al Assad suffered from a heart attack, his brother Rifa'at, who was crucial in crushing the Sunni rebellion in Hama, tried to seize control of Syria. The confrontation, which involved Rifa'at's forces and elite forces from the army that were loyal to Hafez, threatened to destabilize the whole regime. To avoid a bloodbath, a meeting was held with Rifa'at, Hafez and their elderly mother. The outcome was that Rifa'at was sent abroad on a 'diplomatic trip' that turned into exile. After that, Rifa'at continued to challenge the authority of Hafez and his son, though matters never returned to a point of military confrontation as they had in the 1980s. Zisser reported that two of Hafez's brothers, Rifa'at and Jamil, voiced reservations about Bashar's designation as the new president of Syria, and Rifa'at even challenged the legitimacy of Bashar's presidency. Rifa'at was safe voicing his reservation from exile in Spain. But Jamil, who was in Syria and elected in March 2003 as a delegate to the People's Assembly, died in 2004. Rumors spread about an attempt on the life of his son – Mundhir – who became a leading figure in Jamil's clan.
And in Kuwait, competition among the Sabah clan was demonstrated in 2006, in the succession crisis after the death of Emir Jabir Al-Ahamad Al Sabah. The emir was supposed to be succeeded by the crown prince, Sheikh Saad al-Abdallah al-Salim. The deceased emir belonged to Jabir's branch of the family, and the crown prince belonged to the competing branch: Salim's. Because Saad was suffering from a lengthy illness and from senile dementia, he was in no position to perform the constitutional oath, required by the constitution, in front of Parliament. The Salim branch of the family wanted to replace Saad with another of their own, but the equally ambitious and larger branch, descendants of the older son, Jabir, demurred. The Kuwaiti parliament intervened and exercised its independent constitutional powers, demanding that the infirm Sheikh Saad yield power. This was indeed a remarkable moment: the first time in an Arab monarchy that an elected body effectively deposed the monarch, and empowered a new one, without anyone firing a shot. On January 29, former Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Jabir – a member of the Jabir branch – took Sheikh Saad's place. But instead of naming a crown prince or a prime minister who belonged to the Salim branch as was expected, the new emir named both a crown prince and a prime minister from his own, Jabir, branch of the family, a step that infuriated both the Salim branch and the public. Zisser, 62; Commins, xxvii; Tétreault, Mary Ann ,"Three Emirs and a Tale of Two Transitions", *The Middle East Report on Line*, (February 10, 2006); "Kuwait settles royal succession", *BBC News*, January 1, 2006, http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/middle_east/4644734.stm

here is expected to juggle in tandem different and sometimes competing interests, and simultaneously to direct these strategies to the ultimate aim of this politics: staying in power.

To achieve this end, the state leader resorts to different kinds of actions that are characteristic of the politics of survival. Migdal listed three strategies: [3]

A) The Big Shuffle: **The leader holds the power to appoint others and to remove them from office. This power has proved an important tool in preventing state agencies or state-sponsored political parties from becoming threatening centers of power and to prevent loyalties from developing around other strongmen.** Thus, state leaders have frequently replaced ministers of state, commanders of armed forces, party leaders, and top bureaucrats in order to prevent threatening centers of power from coalescing.

B) Non-Merit Appointment: **The power of appointment is not limited to merely dismissing people from their positions and reassigning them elsewhere. The most important source of patronage to loyal followers (loyal is emphasized) has been the power of appointment.** Consequently, some Third World states have taken on an almost familial disposition, exhibiting many characteristics of much less bureaucratized patrimonial systems.

C) Dirty Tricks. These actions have included illegal imprisonment and deportation, strange disappearances, torture, and death squads. They also include unlawful methods and quick modifications of the law to remove key state figures, preempting the emergence of rival power centers, and weakening or destroying groups in positions already powerful enough to threaten the rulers' privileges. Similar methods have also been used against non-state personnel. By resorting to these dirty tricks state leaders here have transgressed the very laws that could serve as the basis for instituting state social control. Thus they reflect a lack of confidence in the state institutions and lack of trust in the institution of law itself – at least, as it stood before they used it as a weapon against their opponents.

Arab leaders have used all of these methods and actions in their efforts to survive. Dirty tricks and the use of law for their own benefit have been favored tactics for Arab rulers. The big shuffle and non-merit appointments – in which loyalty has become synonymous with tribal and family ties – have also been tools used to co-opt political and tribal leaders, and to strengthen the prerogatives and the hold on power of the Arab core elite.

[3] Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States*, chapter 6.

In addition to these methods, Arab leaders have also resorted to two strategies characteristic of their politics of survival: shifting alliances and the Islamist card.

- Leaders often make their alliances with social groups within the wider circle of the traditional/cliental base of power. They make these alliances with one clear purpose: to weaken competing political groups that prove threatening to their authority. And they are by nature ephemeral – they shift along with the sands of politics.
- In playing the Islamist card, the state leader takes advantage of the phenomenon of political Islam. He endorses certain Islamist groups rather than others and forges political alliances with them. The main aim of this strategy is political: to deploy the support of these Islamist groups as a means of legitimizing his rule in a religious sense or/and delegitimizing that of his rivals. The tactic has also been instrumental in undermining rival Islamist groups that pose real challenge to the state's leadership, and sidelining, or even gaining the reluctant support of, other political groups that fear the rise of political Islam in their societies. Here, the leader is deliberately taking advantage of fear. This may be fear of Islamic fundamentalism and its intolerance of non-Sunni, non-Shiite, or non-Muslim groups, or fear of the tyranny of a theocratic rule, or fear of being branded as anti-Islamic.

The combination of these three features has serious implications for the current situation in the region. Three are worth mentioning:

1. First, They explains why it was possible to overthrow the Presidents of Egypt and Tunisia peacefully and why that was not the case in Libya, Yemen, Syria, and why it has floundered all together in Bahrain. A concrete example will illuminate my point. Compare the composition of political elites in Syria and those in Egypt, and it becomes clear that the main difference between the two is that the core elites in Syria tend to be members of a closed ethnicised group (sectarian, confessional, religious and tribal), whereas elites in Egypt are more diversified and less restricted by ethnic consideration. This difference has shaped the outcome in the two countries.

In Syria, the traditional base of power on which the ruling elite has depended was of a sectarian, religious, and tribal. These have controlled the state's security apparatus and the army ranks.

Two circles have developed in the traditional base of power: the inner and outer. Each deserves a description.

The Inner Circle of the Power Base

The inner circle of the power base includes two levels of the ruler's sectarian and tribal group affiliation. The more immediate and the more extended clan.

***Immediate clan members*.** The first level includes Al Assad's immediate tribal/sectarian clan-- from Qardaha in the Latakia province of Western Syria. Members of the president's immediate clan fill the key ranks of the security and military apparatus.[4]

The larger tribal or sectarian group. is demonstrated in the Assads—father and son—reliance on on members of their tribe, the Kalbyia and other tribes of the Alawite minority including the Khayatin, the Haddadin, and the Matawira, to secure their power. This reliance, however, has rarely taken on the connotation of trust, since the main challengers to their power come from within the Alawi community. And it does not exclude the latter's sense of alienation from the actions of their strongmen..[5]

The Wider Circle of the Power Base

The wider circle of the power base upon which the Syrian elites depends features both diversity and fluctuation. It includes those religious, sectarian, tribal, or regional groups, such as Christians, Ismailis and Druz, and now even the Kurds that have historically been marginalized or discriminated against, feel threatened within an increasingly Islamized society, or simply seek to share political, economic, and business privileges.[6][7] Here the regime plays the role of the guarantor, who can ensure the safety and protection of the minorities against the 'tyranny of fundamentalism'. Again, minority groups in Syria are

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[4] Thus, the heads of the defense units, Republican Guard, military intelligence, the military security branch, the Presidential Intelligence Committee, the Bureau of Military Operations and Training, the Air Defense forces, etc.: all are fairly close relatives of al-Assad.For more information see Faksh, 146; footnote 80, 153; Van Dam, Nikolaos, *The Struggle For Power in Syrian: Politics and Society Under Asad and the Ba'th Party,* London: I. B. Tauris, 1997, p.70ff.

[5] Van Dam, ibid.

[6] Van Dam, p. 142. For instance, minorities, such as Christian, Ismailis and Druz, are driven into the alliance by fear, just like the larger Alawite community. Indeed, the regime has encouraged and supported Sunni 'societal Islamism' – that is, Islamist groups that concern themselves with changing social behaviors that conform to their world views, who call for an Islamic mode of life, refrain from politics, and ask their supporters to be loyal to the regime . This support has "raised the ire and panic of other groups." Manea.

[7] Interviewee N. 8 (writer and intellectual), interview by author, Syria, 2007.

pushed to believe, just like the Alwaite community, that the survival of the regime and their well-being is one and the same.[8]

Egypt, on the other hand, has a different composition of core elites. To make this point short, in recent times and before the Egyptian revolution of January 2011, three circles of elites could be identified. The first circle of elites comprises three groups namely military leaders, politicians of the ruling party, and state technocrats. In the second circle the most influential groups are businessmen and trade unionist as well as members of parliament. The third circle includes two new emerging groups, the judges of the supreme constitutional court and influential NGO activists. [9] The president is at the center of the main groups in the first circle. He appoints the first ranks of state technocrats the military men and the administration. On the other hand he is also the chairman of the NDP, which held more than 80% of the seats in the people's assembly.[10]

Nevertheless, despite this highly centralized and authoritarian feature of Egypt's political system, the ruling elite often come from different social backgrounds, and the criteria by which they are chosen have more to do with their party affiliation, education, personal relations and patron-client relations. Ethnic criteria, such as religion, confession, or tribal affiliation are not obvious features in this context. This can explain why it was possible for the Egyptian army leaders to push Mubarak to leave his position. They were not members of the same clan or the same family, whose survival depends on his survival. He was a person- a person that one can replace. In the Syrian case the system as a whole depends on the sectarian and religious factor. If Al Assad family goes, so will the Army leaders.

2. Second, the combination of the three features indicates that we are dealing with two different sets of countries with different priorities:

Countries of new states and old societies: characterized by the newness of their states, lack of a coherent national identity, and division of society along tribal, religious sectarian, linguistic

[8] On the other hand, the Sunnis of rural background, who are part of the regime's alliance, do not represent their larger community. Of course their participation is crucial to legitimizing the regime. Nevertheless, the fact that they hold government positions does not convey an actual dependence on a power base or a representation of their geographic regions. Driven mainly by personal ambition, they come from diverse backgrounds and their numbers are limited. Their paths to power were shaped either by personal relationships and their support for Hafez al-Assad in the coup of 1970 (e.g. Abd al-Halim Khaddam, Mustafa Tlass) or by their technocrat qualification (e.g. Farouq al-Shara'a). The ease with which the Assad family was able to discharge some of these figures or push them to resignation and exile indicates how figurative their power base indeed was.

[9] A group is understood here as a number of people of the same generation and same social background, with a common profession, historical experience and ideological outlook. Abdernasser, Gamal, ibid *

[10] Abdernasser, Gamal, "Egypt: Succession Politics", in Perthes, Volker ed., *Arab Elites: Negotiating the Politics of Change*, London: Boulder, pp.118-120.

and/or regional lines. Yemen and Libya are examples of this group. For this group of states the priorities they are dealing with now have less to do with the launching of a successful democratization process. It has more to do with the very basic questions of building state's institutions and most importantly of keeping their states intact and unified. Will they remain unified or will we witness the creations of new states as was the case after the collapse of the Soviet Union? I will not roll out the second possibility. (**Yemen facing another host of challenges: 300.000 internally displaced persons in the North, 100.000 displaced persons in the South, 500.000 children are feared to die this year from malnutrition)…**

Countries of old states and old societies: characterized by a long tradition of centralized state's apparatus and the existence of strong national identity. This group includes Egypt and Tunisia. For this group of states the issue has more to do with the dismantling of the old authoritarian executive power, the strengthening of state's institutions, and the setting of the separation of powers. This is not an easy process, far from it indeed, as we are seeing in Egypt, where the old system is still kicking and alive. (Tunisia seems to be the only country that is heading to an orderly transformation…).

3. Third, Finally, the three features indicate that the transformations that are taking place in the region will be marred by disappointments if not a retreat to the same old mode of authoritarian politics. In fact, it does not take much to realize that the politics of survival are still very much at play in almost all of these countries. This can be illustrated in the followings:

The Islamist card: The Islamist card has been used repeatedly whether in the form of a) the issuing of fatwas that legitimize the rulers and discredit any use of dissident or demonstrations. That was and still is the case in Egypt, Yemen, Syria, Bahrain, and of course Saudi Arabia. And b) In the form of the production of fear from the tyranny of fundamentalism.

Dirty tricks: Examples are abundant. For instance, Egypt stands as the country that utilized to the letter these tricks to the advantage of the old system. Amnesty International issued a report recently stating that Egypt under Scaf has resorted to the same methods of Mubrabk regime's state brutality against demonstrators, if not worse. In addition, dirty tricks have been used in dividing the reform movements and in launching a concerted defamation campaign against activists, portraying them as traitor following a western conspiracy. The conspiracy theory has been also used repeatedly until today in Libya, Yemen and Syria.

Forging alliances: The ruling elites continue to forge alliances with social groups within the wider circle of the traditional-cliental base of power. They play on their fears of marginalization within the wider system. This has been used in all of these countries. I will use two examples here to illustrate this point
The Al Assad regime has in part been able to retain support throughout the popular uprising by courting Syria's minority groups that looked to the police state for protection. Recognizing the potential danger of a unified Kurdish opposition and a chance to exploit their divisions, Mr. Assad offered long-sought citizenship rights to tens of thousands of Kurds and invited Kurdish leaders to the negotiating table. Syria Kurds who make up an estimated 10 percent of Syria's 23 million people, have been vocal in their protest against decades of discrimination. However, like Syria's Christians, they are also deeply suspicious/ and fear that a new Sunni government will marginalize them even further. In meetings of Syrian opposition leaders, Kurdish representatives have quarreled over which rights, freedoms and powers Kurds would have — or would be denied — in a new Syria.[11]/ This has made it possible for Al Assad regime to exploit this seem in the opposition and strengthen his position.

In Yemen, the inauguration of a new president in Yemen does not indicate that the former president is out of the picture. He retains with his clan a strong hold on the army and security apparatus. His ability to influence the events in the country has been strengthened by the new alliances he has forged with social groups he formally fought, such as the Huthi movement. The Zaydi Huthi movement is fearful from the increasing influence of Salafists and Muslim Brotherhood Islamists in the new power sharing government. Its troops have been fighting their way into neighbouring governances (Haja, Amran and Al Jawf), with the blessing of the former president Saleh.

To conclude this presentation, in light of the features of the Arab authoritarian states, and after more than one year after the Arab Spring, it is safe to assume that the outcome of the transformations that are taking place in the region are open to all possibilities. This include the retreat to old authoritarian conduct of politics or/and the creation of new states. A new map of the region may not be farfetched. It is also safe to assume that the continuation of the politics of survival will mark if not hinder the democratization processes in the region.

Perhaps it is time, therefore, to reconsider the term Arab Spring and look for a different expression. For the spring, I am afraid, is over.

[11] http://www.institutkurde.org/en/info/for-syrian-kurds-assad-or-the-unknown-1232550664.html